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ABSTRACT

While the Official Languages Act of Canada mandates the governmental use of English and French, it is up to regions, localities, and individuals to develop the attitudes and policies which will safeguard the rights of language minorities (including English speakers in francophone areas) and discourage the cultural isolation of language groups. A reconciliation must be effected between English speakers who resentfully view many anticipated applications of the Act (for example, bilingual package labels) as trivial, and French speakers who view the same applications as tokenism. Bilingualism and cross-cultural understanding, where they exist, have come about accidentally as a result of economic exigencies. Educational planning must now aim specifically at fostering multilingual, multicultural competence. (JB)

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Perspectives on Official Languages

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This article is an edited version of the speech given by Mr. Beaty at the annual conference of the Modern Language Council in October, 1978.

The Official Languages Act of Canada — qu'est ça mange l'hiver?

An old American humorist, Josh Billings, had a saying which seems appropriate to the understanding of the Official Languages Act:

"The trouble ain't that people are ignorant; it's that they 'know' so much that ain't so."

But, if this Act seems especially prone to Billings' law, there must be a reason. Perhaps the Act is, in fact, obscure; more probably, its implications are ambiguous; or, most likely, its practical applications are seen as out of line with its intent. At all events, it is obviously in need of explication and interpretation.

There is a very popular belief across the country that the Official Languages Act is okay in principle but anything but okay in practice. Before we look further into that belief let us just review "the facts" as we know them:

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1. The Act is federal law.
2. This law establishes equal status, rights and privileges for English and French within the federal domain.

3. It therefore imposes a duty on all federal departments, agencies, and crown corporations to deal with Canadians in English or French, at their choice, within certain limits of demand and feasibility.

In a nutshell, the Official Languages Act confers an "official" status on English and French for federal purposes, and aims to ensure that the agencies of the federal government act accordingly.

If we want to explain the great variety of perspectives on this question of official languages, we have to begin with the epithet itself: "official."

Why "Official"?

It is impossible to discuss the notion of "officialness" in this context without digressing a moment into the phenomenon of language itself. Language is one of those faculties which we tend to take for granted until, as linguists or language teachers, for instance, we have some special reason for examining its operations.

Then we discover with some amazement the organized complexities of language as a system of sounds and symbols. We learn to see how language moulds our individuality and defines us in relation to our community. We come to recognize it as the key element in the whole process of human socialization. Whether we are sophisticated linguists or the merest of laymen, we know as a fact of our development and our daily experience how very high language stands in the social scheme of things. It is no great mystery that language and status are linked, sociologically speaking.

However, "official languages" seem to be outside any natural pecking order. They are languages of convenience, the language or languages of the state. The languages we grow up knowing or learn along the way are part of our personal heritage and aspirations, but when as a people we select official languages, we do so for official reasons, for reasons of state rather than individual sympathy. Many countries, in fact, have official languages that are not native to the people of that country. In Canada it happens that they are.

Why English and French?

If English and French are to be singled out from the multitude of languages which are in daily use in Canada to be the "official languages" of the state, there presumably is a reason for taking this position and enacting it in a federal statute. In this instance it does not seem that the legislators had much choice. The decision was and remains a political one, based not on any debatable mythology about founding peoples but on the immediate realities of contemporary Canada.

It is no secret that problems of linguistic interrelations in Canada are at least as old as Confederation. The history of linguistic demography in this enormous territory is a fascinating one. Linguistic legislation, in some form or other, is no stranger to federal or provincial statute books. However, the linguistic legislation we are talking about was not addressed to the past but to the present. To think of the Official Languages Act or other related legislation as somehow "exorcizing 1759" is simply to beg the question. That question is whether this Act is necessary, useful, and appropriate in the world where we now live.

Ultimately each one of us must answer that question for himself. The nature of our respective answers may in the end come down to what extent we believe our perspectives on Canada to be reconcilable. To the question "Why English and French rather than Ukrainian and Italian?" the answer must at least partially be because the former are the major linguistic forces in this country.

To be aware of the standing of English and French relative to each other is to define one's concept of Canada. The present Prime Minister has gone on record as believing that English and French play a unique role in Canada for the simple if painful reason that either of the two communities they represent is capable of tearing this country apart.

What about other Canadian languages?

Remembering Josh Billings, let us be precise as to what the Act does and does not say. The Act only defines the "official languages" in relation to federal institutions. It is not

concerned with our language background but with our language use, and our language use only in our "official" capacity as federal citizens. Regardless of our various ethno-linguistic heritages the Act chooses to deal with us, as federal taxpayers, as either an Anglophone or a Francophone. As immigrants to or citizens of this country we are assumed to have, or to be in the process of acquiring, a familiarity with either English or French, and quite probably a greater familiarity with one than with the other.

It is clearly true that there is no other linguistic pairing of Canadian languages of which the same holds true. Individually we may have mastered fifty-seven varieties of language, but on a collective basis it happens that either English or French will normally be spoken by any Canadian. In the language of the mathematician this set of two pretty well accounts for the universe of Canadian speakers.

Furthermore, as the Act is at some pains to make clear, an "official language" is exactly that - an official or institutional convenience which defines the range of languages available for "official" communication. The Act makes this explicit in Section 38 by saying that:

> "Nothing in this Act shall be construed as derogating from or diminishing in any way any legal or customary right or privilege...with respect to any language that is not an official language."

In laymen's language, we may cultivate and converse in what languages we please. It is the federal government that undertakes to operate officially in English and French.

The problems which crop up in discussing the Official Languages Act do not seem to have to do with our intellectual understanding of the nature of "officialness." "Officialness" has to do with institutional common denominators, and the phenomenon of official languages is widespread. The Canadian approach, though necessarily unique to Canadian circumstances, is not in any radical sense different from that which is found in other and comparable societies. However, we are concerned here more with perspectives than principles. If the "official languages" appear to some to violate their sense of linguistic identity, we should at least consider why.

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Distribution of the official languages in Canada

A major reason why implementation of the Official Languages Act has proved difficult and still leaves much to be desired is that the English-speaking and French-speaking populations are unevenly distributed across the land. This is easier to understand as a fact of human geography than as a fact of linguistic life. That over a quarter of all Canadians are French-speaking or that one in seven Canadians speaks nothing but French is a mystifying statistic to a person whose direct experience does not reflect such a pattern. It requires a very considerable effort of imagination in Western Canada to put flesh on those statistical bones. How much easier it would be, after all, if everyone spoke Engli h.

Alongside this long-standing Anglocentricity of the West there is a corresponding Francocentricity developing elsewhere, as if to demonstrate that linguistic fences make good linguistic neighbors. Increasingly it is being said that the experiment of Canadian bilingualism has failed, that the price - both psychological and economic - is more than most Canadians are prepared to pay. So commonplace are these perceptions that they are beginning to sound like a self-fulfilling prophecy. In practice, however, the following questions still need to be asked: how far is this linguistic territoriality likely to go, and how much of it is inevitable or desirable?

The Pan-Canadian cornflake box

The image which the Official Languages Act is most apt to conjure, outside the so-called bilingual belt from Sault-Ste-Marie to Moncton, is one of intrusive bilingualism. Sooner or later you come up against the great Canadian cornflake box or, worse yet, the bilingual beer label almost literally forcing a foreign language down our thirsty throats. These "annoyances" loom large in the literature of the official languages in Canada.

What is most striking about these outcries, this rejection of bilingualism in the home, is the ferocity of the reaction. It somehow appears to be out of all proportion to the cause. The same people who most resent the "imposition" of French on a unilingual English public are those who are least aware of and have the fewest qualms about "imposing" English on fellow-citizens to whom that language is every bit as foreign. English may be the majority official language in Canada - or in the world for that matter - however, an imposition committed by a majority is still an imposition.

The cornflake-box reaction is partly a reaction against the triviality of such invasions. The reaction is disproportionate because the means itself seems disproportionate. It is hard to know what such legislation is up to, what bilingual labelling, for instance, is about, what good any of this is supposed to do. And, where our aims are unclear, it is eminently possible to suspect the worst and to fall back on the familiar scenarios of conspiracy. The cornflake box looms large in our perceptions precisely because it must be either very tricky or very irrelevant.

So what is going on?

What we are seeing is the difficulty which a federal law such as the Official Languages Act has in making an impact in a domain that is very largely outside federal control. Outside the bilingual areas of the country, bilingualism can look trivial because it lacks a context. It looks maddeningly out-of-place. But is it?

The Official Languages Act was promulgated, in the main, to correct a situation in which a predominantly English-speaking public service was failing to provide an adequate service to its French-speaking public in French. The process of linguistic reform of federal services was always bound to be a difficult one, but it was made more difficult by the nature and distribution of the publics concerned.

While the Anglophone minority in Quebec is a relatively concentrated, unilingual and largely urban community, the Francophone minorities are quite often widely dispersed, and for that reason, more often than not bilingual. Indeed, they are in serious danger of assimilation - not because they want to be assimilated, but because of the benign neglect of those who might prevent it.

This combination of circumstances, along with the rather specialized or limited nature of federal services, leads easily enough to the perception that a large unilingual majority is being "inconvenienced" in order that a scattered bilingual minority may feel marginally less isolated. The key question, in fact, is just that: how, as Canadians, do we see our obligation to our official languages minorities and what do we propose to do about it? For, make no mistake about it, the cornflake box that is perceived by one group as the thin end of a sinister wedge is perceived by the other group as the merest tokenism. What for one is too much and too fast is for the other too little and too late.

The role of governments

If we are sometimes unhappy with the effects of the Official Languages Act, we must put aside the delusion that this is always entirely the fault of "governments." If government is the art of the possible (and governments, too, can misjudge what is possible), it is nevertheless we, the people, who make things possible in practice. With all their administrative distortions, government programs still reflect us and our perspectives.

However, governments do have a duty to tell us what they are up to, and in particular where they stand on the survival of official language minorities across Canada, and on language rights. The federal government's efforts to explain its interventions and "language planning" to the voters and tax-payers of Canada have not always been marked by conviction or consistency. Until other levels of government - specifically the Quebec government - began to define their own language rules, the Official Languages Act was projected more as an internal reform of the public service than as a broad statement about federal relations in Canada. Even now we may be unwilling to recognize that our personal perspectives on "official languages" are in any fundamental way tied in with the future of the country.

A recent article by Stacy Churchill of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education makes the point rather well. He reminds us that what we are talking about are our fundamental assumptions and, specifically, "the assumption that French-speaking Canadians have equal rights with English-speaking Canadians." To suggest, as some do, that to speak or desire to speak French is virtually an unCanadian activity is to question that fundamental assumption; it is not just a quibble about cornflake boxes.

The "official languages" at the local and personal levels

From this standpoint we can begin to see that the acid test with respect to our treatment of English and French in Canada is very much a question of the rights and obligations which individual Canadians are prepared to exchange amongst themselves - not for the abstract satisfaction of patching up a federal structure, but as a measure of our own civility as people, as a statement about ourselves.

If we find ourselves resentful towards the laborious insti-

tutional efforts of the federal government, with its apparent emphasis on expensive mechanisms like language training or translation, let us at least take the time to evaluate the intent, and ask ourselves whether or not in our hearts we agree with it. Better that we disagree with it than that we miss the point.

The point has always been to enable English- and French-speaking groups to share this country without thereby sacrificing some basic linguistic rights in the process. This attitude of sharing implies administrative problems, but such problems are far from insuperable. It is the conditions that count. The conditions are crucial, and these conditions are determined not by governments but by people.

The human dimension

What are we as English-speaking Canadians to do: learn French, teach our children French, transact our business in French, or what? It is easy to frame the questions that mean "What is it going to cost me?", and so hard to frame the questions that mean "What will it cost me not to do this?" But in the immediate term the question in Canada is simply how much it means to each of us to let our fellow-Canadian raise his children, stand trial, and deal with his government in the official language of his choice.

Governments sometimes make it possible for a member of an official languages minority to receive a simple service in his or her language. But the commitment cannot end there. We will not get very far unless we recognize that the needs of the minority person, family or community are also special needs requiring special support. And the first step in ensuring that support is to realize that, while these people may be working and living at a disadvantage and "against the grain," that is their right - at least as long as we expect to enjoy a similar right in those parts of the country where our own official language is the minority language.

It is true that for many of us this is not a right that we will ever need to exercise. The same, presumably, can be said of "habeas corpus" or the right of due process. They are convenient rights to have around nonetheless. Above all, such rights are a reflection of a "do-as-you-would-be-done-by" attitude which is based as much on common prudence and good sense as on idealism.

It is in this sense that our local and individual perspectives of the official languages as embodiments of the rights of

all Canadians seem to me to be the touchstones of what it may be possible to accomplish under the umbrella of the Official Languages Act. The Act itself does not change - at least it has not so far - but its effectiveness and vitality do change from year to year in terms of the thousands and tens of thousands of local acts and individual perceptions which it gives rise to.

The human realities behind the Act can sometimes be ugly and uncomfortable. There is still more than enough linguistic chauvinism in Canada - a determination to regard another language as hostile and threatening to one's own. At the risk of over-simplification one might almost say that Canadians can be divided into two groups: those who regard the existence of two official languages as diminishing our collective potential, and those who perceive them as adding to it. If we better understood the bio-chemistry of this dichotomy, we might more easily break out of the "dialogue of the deaf" which too often characterizes discussion of these matters.

Naturally it is not easy to accept that our behavior somehow lacks generosity or imagination. Nonetheless, we should all admit to ourselves that the scales of linguistic justice in Canada have traditionally been loaded towards English. This is not a value judgement, but a fact - just as it is also a fact that even now, Quebec's Official Language Act notwithstanding, the language rights enjoyed by Francophones outside Quebec are some way from comparability with those enjoyed by Anglophones in Quebec.

There are valid historical, demographic and administrative reasons for this situation. The question which confronts us now is whether it is acceptable to our sense of reciprocity among citizens. In short, it comes down to the concept of language rights that we are prepared to entertain and, hence, what institutional measures we do or will support.

Individuals and Institutions

Institutions generally will not and cannot do what a majority of individuals do not want them to do. It is perfectly all right to talk of an institutional capacity to provide services in two languages. It serves to remind us that institutions can be bilingual even when the vast majority of their employees are unilingual. But that should not blind us to the fact that all those unilinguals have something - and something of the greatest importance - to say about the true nature of institutional

bilingualism. What they have to say is whether they believe in it or not, whether they respect its goals or not, and whether they will help it, hinder it, or stand aloof from it.

When we talk "official languages" in Canada or when we talk about bilingual institutions, we are chiefly talking about two things: the readiness of governments and courts to deal with citizens in more than one official language, and the readiness of communities generally to make educational or other social provisions that can favor the use of the minority official language in their area.

In the area of federal government services, the more government infrastructure is actually put in place to provide services, the clearer it becomes that this infrastructure is nothing without individual goodwill and personal commitments to service. This observation is a capsule history of the federal programs to provide service under the terms of the Official Languages Act. Where the good will exists, nothing is impossible; where it does not, the opportunities for bureaucratic stalling are infinite.

The second observation is no less crucial. It is that, even when the government infrastructure is present and the goodwill exists, such provisions tend to be pretty marginal to the survival or development of the official languages minorities. For, whatever we may think or say in moments of Orwellian gloom, man does not live by governments alone. In fact, the contacts of citizens with governments of any kind are pretty sporadic - hardly what one could call a cultural lifeline for a beleaguered minority.

If there is one abiding truth in the history of the official language relations in Canada it is that, in good times and in bad, official language minorities, like other minorities, maintain themselves largely through their own efforts. What we have to consider is whether or not they can continue to do so in the late twentieth century global village, and if they can, what the conditions are that will make their survival possible. In this respect, no institutional question is likely to be of greater importance than the question of education.

Minority language schooling and second-language learning — are they interrelated?

It has become a commonplace of the "official languages" environment that if we have failed to bilingualize the federal

public service by providing language training to "mature monoglots" (unilingual public servants in mid-career), we can still recoup our losses through something called "the youth option," that is, through better second-language education in the schools.

Two questions come to mind in this regard. The most obvious is to ask ourselves whether we really believe we are capable of doing a better job of teaching a second official language to youngsters than to adults. A more basic question is what the purpose of this exercise is and how it fits in with other educational priorities.

It is a notable paradox of the Canadian condition that we sometimes show more interest in acquiring a second language than we do in the people who speak it as a first language. This phenomenon would repay some study. However, we do learn second languages for a reason, and the reason why we learn them has a lot to do with <u>how</u> we learn them.

We all know that the reasons for learning a language vary greatly: everything from what our Latin teachers used to call "mental discipline" through every shade of commercial or utilitarian consideration, all the way to the "fun" motives of going on holiday, getting into a new literature, or simply collecting languages. In the Canadian situation - rich as it is in available native speakers - the teaching and learning of the official languages still fail to live up to their potential. True, there are many thousands of French-English bilinguals in this country, but they are more of a tribute to our economic system than to our education system.

The fact is that until quite recently the interrelation of French teaching in Canada to the existence of French-speaking people in Canada seemed to be a well-kept secret. Even now we are not sure whether it matters how we treat our official language minorities, or whether language education in Alberta has any bearing on linguistic relations in, shall we say, Quebec. Perhaps it strikes us as abhorrent to even consider language learning in such calculating terms. Certainly this kind of speculation does not lend itself to any simplistic balance-sheet exercise.

There is a dialectic involved here. Various linguistic interests are jockeying for position and reacting to one another. There is nothing particularly new about that. What *is* new is that these interacting attitudes and activities are increasingly conscious and explicit. The politics of such preoccupations

figure larger and larger in the pronouncements of the Council of Ministers of Education, and pressure groups are increasingly organized in the fields of language education.

We should take advantage of this situation in which language relations, language planning and language education are very much in the public spotlight to review our respective commitments. To anyone who is concerned with languages in Canada today the status of the official languages and the communities they represent cannot be indifferent or irrelevant. Our perspectives on these two languages make something of a test case for our seriousness about Canadian languages generally. The institutional or constitutional treatment we agree to accord English and French, and their respective minorities across the country, is likely to be the measure of our readiness to accept both the costs and the benefits of linguistic plurality as a whole.

* * *

Minority language schooling and second-language learning are interrelated. If we do not feel we can afford to provide our main linguistic minorities with the institutional conditions in which they can use their respective languages and still be Canadian, what reasonable hope or support have we to offer to other linguistic groups?

If many of us are or have been teachers of languages, it is presumably because we set some store by the people who speak those languages. In the case of English and French that accounts for an overwhelming majority of our own countrymen - not to mention the hundreds of millions outside Canada who speak those languages. If our perspectives on these major language groupings do not extend to taking institutional measures to preserve and enhance their vitality, as they are used throughout Canada now, it is doubtful whether our language teaching will bear useful fruit. We undoubtedly still have much to do to get our perspectives straight and to act accordingly. However, to return to Josh Billings:

"I never knew a man troubled with melancholy who had plenty to do and did it."

END OF ARTICLE